

COEO's Landmark Research Summary: *Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education*

by Grant Linney

Over the past year, Andrea Foster (our first full-time employee thanks to funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation) reviewed a wide array of current and international research into the multiple, powerful and lasting outcomes produced through utilizing outdoor and experiential education (OEE) as a key learning methodology. As co-authors, Andrea and I produced an 80-page document that reports the findings according to COEO's four stated values, namely, education for curriculum and community, character, wellbeing, and environment.

Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education also highlights "OEE in Action" descriptions of particular programs such as secondary school interdisciplinary studies, wilderness adventure pursuits, and urban-based activities including the exploration of local neighbourhoods and school ground greening projects. The publication features a professional layout and numerous great colour photographs of students powerfully connecting with themselves, others and their natural surroundings through outdoor learning. In addition to outlining exemplary examples of government leadership in establishing and making effective use of OEE, it also provides a number of evidence-based recommendations to the Ontario government as well as to Canadian postgraduate schools.

This is a landmark publication whose time has come. It is clear that OEE is needed now more than ever before. However, OEE will only assume its rightful place in educating for our future if we can convince our political leaders and many others of its value through the promotion of solid outcomes-based research. We hope that, through its widespread distribution, *Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education* will contribute significantly to current discussions about making today's youth more active and comfortable in the outdoors, more confident about themselves

and their interactions with others, and more connected through their hands, heart and mind to the natural life support systems of this planet.

Executive Summary of *Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education*

Outdoor and Experiential Education (OEE) is a vital learning methodology for today's children and young people. Its provision of safe, educator-framed and hands-on experiences in outdoor settings provides unique, vital and lasting benefits in terms of education for curriculum and community, education for character, education for wellbeing and education for environment. This document is a compelling synthesis of a wide variety of current outcomes-based research. It offers concrete evidence as to why OEE should become an essential and publicly funded part of education for the future.

OEE relates curricula to real-life situations. Research shows that students using OEE and the local environment as a comprehensive focus and framework for curricula demonstrate

- increased engagement with and enthusiasm for learning
- improved academic performance, including better language skills
- greater sense of pride and ownership in accomplishments
- a variety of substantially increased critical thinking skills.

OEE promotes lifelong physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. A growing body of studies suggests that

- contact with nature is as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep
- time spent outdoors correlates with increased physical activity and fitness in children

- exposure to green space reduces crime and increases individuals' general wellbeing and ability to focus
- children as young as five have shown a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder when they are engaged in outdoor activities in natural settings.

OEE educates for character. It provides powerful opportunities for extensive personal and interpersonal growth, particularly when trained outdoor educators are involved in all aspects of the program. Major research studies have found that

- many character traits are significantly enhanced as a result of OEE experiences, including creativity, enthusiasm, self-motivation, self-understanding, assertiveness, maturity, independence and self-confidence
- many social skills are also enhanced through OEE experiences, including cooperation, effective communication, decision making, problem solving, task leadership and social competence
- OEE promotes marked improvements in behaviour for special populations such as at-risk youth. Retention and continued growth in these areas is also evident as a result of such hands-on experiences.

Finally, and in COEO's opinion most importantly, **OEE directly exposes children and youth to the natural environment in ways that develop powerful, knowledgeable and lifelong connections essential for a healthy and sustainable future.** Leading Canadians such as Robert Bateman, Thomas Homer-Dixon and David Suzuki all strongly agree and are quoted in this document.

Research also shows that

- children who have early, sequenced and repeated experiences in the outdoors develop a kinship with nature that can evolve into an informed, proactive and lifelong stewardship of the natural environment
- there are great benefits in the use of outdoor education methodologies for environmental education purposes

- children love to be part of the solution — especially when they are able to see the effects of their positive interaction with nature first-hand.

As a result of these findings, The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) urges government, parents, volunteer leaders and other community members to actively reclaim the outdoors as a safe, fulfilling and essential part of growing up in this province and beyond.

COEO also makes the following major recommendations to the Ontario government:

1. Formally recognize the value of OEE as a unique and powerful learning methodology that particularly addresses the pressing need of education for environment as well education for character, wellbeing and curriculum.
2. Develop a comprehensive across-all-grades sequence of school-based outdoor activities that addresses the four values of OEE and particularly education for environment.
3. Provide funding to school boards so that every student is assured a minimum of two one-day OEE programs and one five-day OEE program at recognized outdoor education centres.
4. Mandate that OEE is a recognized area of specialization at Primary, Junior, Intermediate and Senior levels in all Ontario faculties of education.

Postgraduate schools of Canadian universities are also urged to promote further Canadian-based research into the various powerful and lasting benefits of OEE for all elementary and secondary school students.

For more information about *Reconnecting Children through Outdoor Education*, including details about how to order single or multiple copies, go to www.coeo.org/news.htm.

Grant Linney teaches at the Upper Canada College Norval Outdoor School. He refuses to retire because he is having too good a time.